CHURCHES OF CHRIST

THROUGH

THE DARK AGES

A Celebration

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A Celebration

by

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Dedication

There has been the idea of a church of Christ in every century of this earth since its founding by the Lord Jesus on that first Pentecost after His resurrection (Acts 2). But it has been hidden historically. Now the history is exposed as a gem uncovered by the prospector's spade. The internet is as much responsible for this as any other tool, for it was by the internet that I have been able to contact brethren in England who have dedicated much more time and energy to this study than I. For the most part, I am simply reporting the fruits of those efforts, however imperfectly.

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CHURCHES OF CHRIST THROUGH THE DARK AGES

A History

Introduction

Having grown up under the influence of churches of Christ, I feel particularly close to the fellowship which concerns these next few pages. I completed my higher education at Freed-Hardeman University, a private school dedicated to the principles of this fellowship. All through these school years were heard the speculations, suppositions, and affirmations that our fellowship had lasted through the centuries to our day. I remember the wondrous joy I felt when I first learned of Anabaptists and their marvelous fight against papal hegemony. Of course here were our brethren, having been hidden "in the wilderness," now once more

thrust upon the scene. And of course, I was wrong.

But since that time I have learned a much more wondrous story that fills me with that much greater joy--the true drama of hidden bands of followers of Jesus Christ who by God's grace were able to maintain their identity as churches of Christ through over twelve hundred years of the most intense persecution imaginable, brought on every bit as much by the ignorance of neighbors as by the clerical authorities of Rome.

To be clear, we must establish both a doctrinal basis as well as historical basis for this research. The early church of Christ of the first century preached the Good News of the death, burial, and resurrection of the Messiah, the Lord Jesus Christ of Nazareth, that was considered the fulfillment of all related Old Testament prophecies (I Corinthians 15). Then the admonition was

repeatedly given to believe it, and on that basis, to repent and be immersed in water in Jesus' name to obtain forgiveness of one's sins. When such obedience was completed, the individual was considered saved, a Christian and automatically a member of the fellowship of believers who had done the same. Regular attendance to meetings of this fellowship was expected, especially on Sunday (the first day of the week) when the Lord's Supper would be taken, songs to God sung, prayers offered together, the material needs of the members satisfied according to ability, and the word of God heard with the people devoting themselves to live righteously according to Christ (Acts 2; 8; 10; 20; etc.). There was no clergy and the barest of official capacity (I Timothy 3).

Almost no one today disputes this synopsis of the first-century church. It is marked by simplicity of doctrine, belief, organization, activity, worship and devotion. There were no

headquarters for the church acknowledged, no hierarchy in place, no elaborate rituals and no ceremonial calendar.

Nor do most deny that the present state of Christianity evolved (digressed?) from this humble beginning. But the rub is this: was such change, though expected and even desired by many, allowed according to the canon of the twenty-seven books of the New Testament? At the beginning the early church "continued steadfastly in the apostles' doctrine" (Acts 2:42). Apostolic tradition was clear and authoritative for all the churches (I Corinthians 4:14-17; II Thessalonians 2:15). And here is the clincher: one was not to go beyond what the apostles had written and/or authorized in writing for the churches (I Corinthians 4:6; II Corinthians 10:9-11).

Here then is the philosophical heart of the definition of a church of Christ. If such a fellowship has existed through the

centuries, it will exist according to these terms. These are the terms of present day congregations calling themselves churches of Christ. Have such congregations been uncovered from the past? This is the story before you.

Chapter One

"In the beginning..."

(AD 27-500)

In Florence, Italy, is the Baptistery of San Giovanni. It is for immersing believers. It is ancient, reaching to the earliest demonstrations of Christian devotion. The word "baptize" is the anglicized Greek which when translated into English means to dip, to plunge, to immerse, to perform a purpose by so doing (washing, dyeing). Greek ships that were sunk were said to be baptized in the deep. Out of eleven Christian references to baptism in the second century, immersion is plainly understood and/or described in ten. Only in one, the Didache, is pouring substituted, and that only as a last resort. Baptism is plainly explained to obtain for the one immersed salvation, the remission of sins, the knowledge of

God.

Baptism is one of the first things to change historically from the New Testament pattern. Another is the organization of the church, from an eldership taken from the congregation to a single clergy (bishop) authorized to oversee and preside over all services. A third is the commencement of the celebration of Easter. Here then are benchmarks to indicate what church we are dealing with.

The reason for this digression from early church practice had to do with allowing students of the apostles to determine meanings of doctrine which sometimes contradicted plain statements in the Scripture itself. That plus the growing thought of interpreting scripture allegorically yielded the individual to group consensus, which then bred a variety of church heresies and heterodoxies. The Hierarchy was established to maintain a uniformity and control over the churches. As the centuries rolled, the centers of

control vacillated (sometimes violently) between Rome, Constantinople, and Alexandria. The farther a church was from either of these areas, the more freedom it could exercise.

Gaul bordered Italia in the Roman Empire to the west. By the third century, Christians were well established in the province and undergoing intense persecution, especially in Lyons. The apostle Paul had made plans in the first century to sail to the outermost western rim of empire, Hispania. Just north was the western coast of Gaul, and then the isle of Britannia.

We do not know the details, but Christianity was well established in the British Isles by the three hundreds. British bishops attended the Council of Arles in 314. Patrick (ca. 389-461), who reportedly first took Christianity to Ireland (it actually was already there), came from a Christian family in Britain. By the fifth century (the 400's), every indication is that a Christian

civilization was thriving on the Isles at this time.

Interestingly, the typical picture of Britannia is one of entrenched paganism, slow to convert to Christ if at all. The reason for this difference is found in what it means to be Christian. The hierarchial changes enveloping churches throughout the empire were very slow to get to Britain. Rome, gaining the churches in the West almost by default (Constantinople had its hands full with eastern troubles), never considered Britain in the fold until the end of the 500's, under the "shepherding" of Augustine of Canterbury. The problem? Britain's Christians' sluggishness to acknowledge the Roman bishop's authority over their churches and the rejection of an insurgent doctrine begun by another Augustine, of Hippo (354-430).

He is the one who fully developed the concept of original sin, total depravity, and thus the "need" for infant baptism. A church

leader who opposed such innovation was a Briton named Pelagius. Augustine's antipathy toward Pelagius and the Christians of Britain became legendary. That the more ancient orthodox Christian practice is now known historically as Pelagianism demonstrates that Augustine won the debate. Infant baptism (more and more becoming affusion and sprinkling) on the basis of inherited original sin became the norm for the Church.

Except in Britain. Throughout the 400's and 500's, the church sought (with notable exceptions) to maintain its original doctrine and practice. But the times were changing.

With the collapse of Julius Caesar's Roman Empire (420's-470's), the Britons were left on their own against foreign invaders. The Picts and Scots of the upper north were especially troublesome. With legion withdrawals to help calm things in the

east closer to the capital, and with no money from the empire coffers to pay for western protection, Britannia found itself trying to preserve civilization as they knew it. They elected a king (though events are sketchy at this point in British history, it seems that there was no overlord usually running British communities; there seems to be remarkable demonstrations of self-government along republican lines) whose responsibility was to take care of the Pict/Scot problem. The man chosen was Vortigern.

Vortigern goes to precedent and hires Saxons from the continent (from the province of Germania) to settle on the coast and border areas as a buffer against invasion. At first, the plan works well. The Picts and Scots cease to be a problem. But then the Saxons get restless and begin their own raiding parties into Britain. Vortigern has no plan against the Saxons.

At this point in British history, the clouds descend obscuring

our efforts to see the past. What little can be seen through the haze seems to be this: another British overlord is chosen, Riothamus, who organizes his own army and crushes the Saxon insurgency. He has backing from both Rome and Constantinople. He also targets churches and church schools throughout the British Isles. Being Rome's man, over twenty years of violent rule, he breaks the back of the pre-Catholic Christian society that was Britannia. The result? The Saxons are routed, and "Pelagian" Christianity is no longer a force in Britain.

Riothamus is so successful that he takes the war to the Saxons themselves in Germania. Promised a major army of reinforcements from the western emperor Anthemius (ruled 467-472), he plows into the heart of Saxony itself. But the army never materializes, while all the Saxons in the world rush upon him. Barely escaping, he heads toward the coast of Normandy in the area of apple

orchards called Avalon, where he is never heard from again.

The final years of Britannia are those of anguish, slavery, and exile of Britons in their own land. The Saxons re-approach settlement in the isles, there being no more organized effort to keep them out. Some Britons settle in the far west (what will be Wales). Most try to hang on to what they knew of life, order, and religion as the Saxons over the next hundred years absorb the area as their own. The term Briton (through the Welsh derivative) will come to mean slave, while Britannia will become Angleland (England). The work of Augustine of Canterbury will be much more among the Angles and Saxons than the Britons, as he seeks to define for these insurgent settlers Christianity according to Rome.

Over the centuries that follow, it will be the loyal Roman

churchmen who write the histories and memoirs of conquering barbarians anxious to be called Romans (civilized). The great kings will be those who help empower the Roman church and entrench its influence.

Chapter Two

Hiding Among the Franks

(AD 500-1000)

To escape the pillage, slavery, and alien culture engulfing their homeland, many Brits sailed across the channel to find some rest and peace on the continent. Seeking to establish some essence of home (much as the pioneers to America would do later), they sought to keep alive their concept of religion, education, and refinements. In the area of old Gaul called Amorica, these British refugees populated the outermost peninsula, calling it Brittany (Little Britain?). Here they quietly work and live and worship over the next 500 years. We know practically nothing of them historically during this time. Only that, periodically on order from Rome, armies, legates, or town authorities would round up various

"colonies" of heretics for trial and death throughout the area of the Franks. But when the fog of historical darkness begins to lift, what we find is wondrous.

The new political order that was arising in Europe after the collapse of Rome's empire involved all the continent. The Franks were increasing their power, property and prestige, all the time having the recaptured ancient Roman grandeur in mind. This meant that the Pope (the de facto Roman representative of that grandeur) had to be allied in the effort. This turned the Frankish Empire into the Holy Roman Empire. Of course, enemies of the Church could not be tolerated, and that meant enemies of the authority of the hierarchy of Rome must die.

The only word we get of the church of Christ during this time (700's) is not, surprisingly, from the West but from Central Europe. A Byzantine monk complains of a debate he had had with

a group of Christians who had the audacity to ignore Rome, the holy feast days, and the saints. They worshipped in poor hovels, and their leaders were simple laymen from the church. They refused any title but Christian only.

But then, in 1025, a man named Gundulf was found in northern France preaching the ancient mode of baptism and rejecting the baptism of the Church. Pierre de Bruis was known about one hundred years later to preach contrary to Roman doctrine in southern France. In the area of what is now Belgium, under severe persecution, over one hundred churches of Christ were discovered in 1143. In 1146, a Henry of Toulouse was found preaching "church of Christ" doctrine. Interestingly, during this time it is recorded that many Balkan and Bulgarian brethren came to France to help their fellows in this particular trouble. This will be all we hear of the Central brethren until 1519.

The connection between these two efforts of Central and West is very interesting and compels more study. A possible link is the British slaves who were sold along Slavic and Muslim trade routes throughout Europe.

It is foolish to believe that every Briton or Breton (Briton of Brittany) was a member of the church of Christ, clandestinely or otherwise. Or that either Britannia or Brittany maintained a collective hold on Christianity's ancient practices. Roman Catholic hegemony was almost entirely successful--almost.

What could be the case is that Central and West fed each other through the centuries, sending missionaries back and forth to provinces and villages where their message had a familiar ring, where old memories were stirred, or where simple knowledge of the Scriptures admitted the correctness of the preaching.

The churches of Christ in France during these years have no

organization beyond the local church. They have no political clout, no force of arms, no money. They are totally at the mercy of the Frankish Empire.

All the thrones are empowered by Rome. To stand against the pope was to stand against the king of your own country. Repeated persecutions, the later Hundred Years' War, the Black Death, all seem to have worked against these brethren and their efforts to sustain themselves. What bare remnant might have remained will vanish into the more fundamentalist Protestant culture to come (Huguenots), to be summarily banished under the heavy hand of Louis XIV.

But they had done their job. They kept the faith dutifully alive and well for over 500 years, even spreading it throughout Frankish territory, until it could get back to England. That it did with the indirect help of a man named William.

Chapter Three

Back in England

(AD 1000-1500)

William the Conqueror was born around 1028 in the area of Normandy. Believing that he was the rightful king of England, having been denied the throne by Harold Godwinson, William invades England with permission from the pope in one of the most famous battles of all history in 1066. This establishes Norman rule over England. Many of those who return with him and later are the descendants of those exiled Brits regaining their long-lost and long-dreamt-of homeland.

Did they bring the church of Christ with them? What little we might hear of the church in England before 1066 is the barest of hints, as the record of Offa king of England seems to relate, that

Archbishop Jaenberht of Canterbury "was educated in the 'family' of the church of St. Augustine in Canterbury" (ca. 770). Did the Church have different "families" in 770 Britain? The different families of the Church may simply mean particular schools for parochial education; then again, the statement may mean to differentiate non-Pelagian from Pelagian Christianity. The need to make that distinction would mean that "Pelagian" Christianity (the church of Christ) was still around enough to demand differentiation. This we know: the Roman Church will not feel comfortable about the churches in these isles until some four hundred years later.

Be that as it may, in the north Yorkshire dales has been found in the second floor of Castle Bolton a baptistry for immersion, dating to the 1000's. Around 1160, a group of folks were brought before Henry II; and they used the opportunity to preach the

ancient gospel of Christ to king and parliament. They did not die at this time but were literally branded as heretics. From the 1200's on, the record is clear that churches of Christ were back in the British Isles. Congregations are known to have existed in Hill Cliff, Wales in 1390 and 1417; one in Chesterton, Cambridge in 1457; and by 1587, several are said to be in London. Tottlebank, Furness had one in 1669.

During the impressment of Norman rule, the feudal system became full-blown. But unlike other areas of attempted empires, the English knew something of freedom. The scribes and scholars of Henry VIII will confess to finding no documentation of any surrender of the English churches to the Roman See, which fact will be used as a defense of the orthodoxy of Henry's break with Rome in 1534. Such is the indication of love of freedom and

independence, echoing from the early years of Vortigern, that found its way into Norman ranks and manifested itself against the tyranny of King John, in 1215, with the lordly demand of the Magna Carta. There does not seem to be any record of mistreatment of the church of Christ during his reign. But that the church grew in influence is demonstrated by the following.

In 1229, the Catholic Church banned the Bible to the common people. In 1235, the Friars Minorities came to England to suppress the "heresy" of the church of Christ (believers' immersion for the forgiveness of sins; rejection of clergy, cathedrals, original sin; etc.).

It seemed suppressed indeed until John Wycliff (1329-1384) came on the scene. He pushed hard in the direction of churches of Christ, even to putting the Bible into the hands and language of the people. Arguing with a cleric, Wycliff reportedly retorted, "Ere

many days hence, I'll have the boy with the plow learning more Scripture than you!" He is responsible for the first known attempt to translate the Bible into the English language. Though condemned by the pope in 1377, he was well protected and died in his bed.

But what truly connects him to churches of Christ is a letter written in 1519 to Desiderius Erasmus by Johannes Slechta Costelecius. Costelecius was informing Erasmus about a group of Christians in Bohemia in 1410. In this letter, followers of Wycliff in Bohemia were practicing believers' baptism by dipping, electing officers from the laity, and accepting no authority but the Scriptures.

A Bohemian named Jan Hus (1374-1415) reportedly ran with Wycliff's teaching, causing a tremendous stir in Central Europe. He would be counted the originator of the Protestant Reformation

that took hold of Europe in the 1500's.

From Wycliff came the Lollards, not fully identified with churches of Christ (as indeed is the same problem with Hussites). But in 1401, the first Lollard martyr, William Sawtre, was counted an immersed believer.

There is the possibility that Costelecius is confusing an independent demonstration of churches of Christ in Central Europe with Wycliff's work. Another consideration is that members of the church (such as Sawtre) simply joined themselves to what they felt were kindred spirits in the Lollards.

Here let us make a point crystal clear. We are not saying that there has been apostolic succession in any sense through these centuries. But the thesis is that there has been historical continuation of doctrinal proclamation and practice which

demonstrates churches of Christ (I Timothy 3:15, 16), a record of continuity, consistency, and longevity that even the Church of Rome cannot rival.

Chapter Four

Facing the Protestants

(AD 1500-1600)

As the feudal system began to slip away under a rising mercantile middle class, Johann Gutenberg, entrepreneur that he was, published the Latin Bible by printing it on moveable type in 1456. The French had separated themselves from the Holy Roman Empire (which was taking on a decidedly Saxon hue) and started pushing for more land in the west. Eventually the holdings of England on the western continental coast fell to France. The Italian Catholic, Christopher Columbus, appealed to Catholic Spain, after she put down the Muslim Moors in her borders, for money to cross the Atlantic Ocean to Cathay (China). He found the Americas in 1492. The Muslims were forced to pull back into

what is known as the Ottoman Empire, never threatening Europe again. The Byzantine Empire (what was left of the old Roman rule) had fallen to the Ottomans in 1457. This allowed Catholic advance into Eastern Europe, the Orient, and the New World.

Once again, changing times caught churches of Christ in a maelstrom of war, power-grabbing, disease, and shifting fortunes. Jan Hus had had his influence felt throughout Central and Eastern Europe, being martyred for his faith in 1415. One hundred years later, in Wittenburg, Germany, a Catholic monk and educator named Martin Luther shook the world (and it's still shaking, incidentally) by nailing on the Wittenburg church door 95 theses against Catholic dogma. He later declared, "We are all Hussites now."

Thus began a rebellion against Catholic control of society that reshaped the religious landscape forever. In 1527, ten years after

Luther's propositions, a loosely connected group of "radicals" decided to organize into a fellowship of independent churches. They were termed Anabaptists because in Catholic eyes they rebaptized themselves, thus repudiating the sacraments of the Church. They had peculiar beliefs. They were quickly caught up in the faith-only concepts of justification from Martin Luther. They refused to sing in their assemblies, counting such activity worldly. They were extreme pacifists, having nothing to do with arms or government. And their baptism was in the mode of pouring (affusion). Because they were so loose in interpreting scripture, they were very vulnerable to extremes in doctrine. For this reason, neither Catholic nor Protestant tolerated them.

The Protestant view of government that began to take shape was that, since the people of a certain town, province, country, etc. were no longer Catholic, it was unfair discrimination for their

rulers to accept only Catholic loyalties. The Catholic Church, not about to let so many leave the fold (with the wealth and influence such numbers held), immediately encouraged war against the wayward children. The Protestants, seeking government control of their own, fought back. This wracked Europe in bloody spasms for almost 100 years! And if places like Ireland are considered, the blood flowed for much longer than that.

In England, a commission was sent to the religious authorities to put an end to "anabaptists" in 1538. The trouble with that is, there were no Anabaptists in England at that time, certainly none of any number. What England is responding to, then, can be none other than churches of Christ (as these groups are designated in the records), which had been practicing believers' immersion for the forgiveness of sins for over one thousand years in the West! Remember that the Anabaptists of Reformation heritage did not

practice immersion, though it seems original sin was put on the back burner of doctrine among them until Calvinism's insurgency into their ranks.

Nevertheless, it was easy and even desirable to label churches of Christ with the Anabaptist moniker. This will have a decided impact on the brethren as the 1600's roll by.

The most famous member of the church of the past thousand years must be William Tyndale (1495-1536). He carried on Wycliff's work to get the Bible faithfully translated into the hands of the English people. Both the printing press and humanistic scholarship were working wonders along these lines. Along these same lines, members of the church were now able to publish their views with relative ease, but still at great cost. Tyndale is on record preaching that baptism is immersion for the forgiveness of one's sins. And it cost him his life. Henry VIII, great reformer that

he was, had Tyndale executed in 1536.

By 1612, countless Christians had paid with their lives for believing contrary to Rome, then London. Some report that Christians were publicly executed in over twenty-six places in England, numbering over 1000. Even the Separatist and Puritan settlers of Pilgrim fame in New England had a law making religious immersion a capital crime in the 1620's.

But the point is this: it is not the members of churches of Christ who were insurgents, heretics, changing, troubling. As their history rises phoenix-like from the ashes of religious bigotry and ignorance and self-imposed darkness, they are the ones repeatedly shown (or is that shone?) to be stalwart, constant, bold, faithful, which is why we can hear their proclamation of faith today.

Chapter Five

Enter the Baptists

(AD 1600-1800)

The Baptists freely admit to being divided about their origins. This is understandable. The times now considered are still confused and the cost of dissent still bitter. Theirs is a story of bravery and struggle, as many peoples were adjusting their eyes to the Light as they were coming out of papal domination. Their story is also peculiarly English.

That the modern term Baptist came from the longer derisive Anabaptist is now admitted by most. Interestingly, it is not the term that stuck with those whose actions originated it. The Bohemians (Hussites) would not allow the derivative of the world's name-calling to determine or define their efforts for pure

Christianity, though later descendants did happily take on the Mennonite name.

As England struggles for purity of Christian discipleship, they fracture into various groups. The Church of England spawns many offshoots, such as the Covenanters, the Puritans, the Separatists, the Congregationalists, the Reformed, the Presbyterians, etc.

John Smyth, with Thomas Helwys (ca. 1607), Separatists taking leave of England with their congregation for safer lodging in the Netherlands, find themselves under the influence of the Mennonites who have migrated to that region. Smyth, thinking he has found the truth, puts his lot in with the Mennonites. Helwys will not go that far and, becoming the de facto leader of the group, brings them back to England.

At this time the Baptists (as they are beginning to be called)

are very loose in their terms of fellowship and for many years seek rapprochement with the Mennonites on the continent. But because of their refusal to accept fully the doctrines of Menno Simmons, the Mennonites reject full fellowship with them.

Anabaptist beliefs have already been put forth. English Baptists tended to be more involved with government, allowing oaths of allegiance, and even the taking up of arms. Soul sleeping and apostolic succession for the baptizer, also part and parcel of the Mennonite faith, were rejected by the Baptists. The Baptists found themselves in the midst of the Great Rebellion (Cromwell's revolution against the English monarchy) and then were considered established before the government by the time of William and Mary of Orange in 1688. They were able to build schools and began to advance church organization beyond the local congregation for evangelistic and fellowship purposes.

A major conflict for the Baptist fellowship took place over doctrine from which they never recovered. By the 1540's, a man named John Calvin (French Catholic moved to Geneva, Switzerland) had developed a systematic theology based on Augustine's presumption of inherited guilt but contrary to Catholicism's works of divine merit. Incorporating Luther's premise of faith-only salvation, Calvin worked out a very logical if flawed view of grace. It is expressed in the **TULIP** acrostic: **T**otal depravity, **U**nconditional election, **L**imited atonement, **I**rresistible grace, and **P**erseverance of the saints.

This new teaching quickly invaded the ranks of practically every Protestant denomination where immediate division ensued. The new doctrine called Calvinism soon became even more definitive of Protestant theology than Luther's. The Baptists were not spared. The Calvinist (Particular) Baptists began to ascend in

numbers and influence and carried that ascendancy into America. Baptists have from the first felt compelled to credalize their faith, the most popular being The Philadelphia Confession of Faith.

Thus the Augustinian insurgency came full circle--professed Christians who believe in original sin rejecting infant christening. This was obtained because Luther's maxim of faith-only was accepted without question. Therefore baptism, as important as it was, would never rise for these folks beyond church work (sacrament).

To be on the outside forever looking in on acceptable society is a burden of heart beyond proper expression. You think of yourself at a loss and you consider your children doomed. Consequently, when the Protestant Reformation took hold in England, the promise it held for inclusion was the very scent of

heaven. William Tyndale ended his life with a bold prayer for the king to have his eyes opened by God.

When a group of religious dissenters showed up, courageous, pius, rejecting Rome and London with their infant baptisms, determined to follow God and not man in all things, surely members of churches of Christ would be drawn to them. Indeed, it was just this way. A Leonard Busher published a tract in 1614 calling for religious liberty, believing in believers' immersion.

Baptist historians freely admit the fellowship and influence sustained in their ranks by "dissenters," one such being the marvelous Henry Denne. Denne was a member of the church of Christ, highly respected among the Baptists, known for his views on political toleration for religious dissidents. He was immersed by Thomas Lambach in 1643, where Lambach preached in London. Denne was arrested more than once for preaching. He

preached and established churches of Christ in some ten different locations throughout England. He was also instrumental in the conversion of Oliver Cromwell's daughter and her husband. He wrote some seven books and tracts. Both Denne and another evangelist for the church, Benjamin Cox, were known as able debaters. Denne died in 1658.

The Baptists did not immerse until around 1641. That this change is due to the influence of members of the church of Christ should be obvious. At first there were many similarities, such as rejection of clergy, rejection of a sacred calendar, regular celebration of the Lord's Supper, no instrumental music allowed in the service. But a pastor system developed quickly from a confessed call to preach that established the evangelist as quasi-head of the congregation. Also, an experience of grace was demanded for church membership, and the Lord's Supper was

eaten whenever the members wanted to rather than weekly. Emphasis on the Old Testament soon produced religious holidays for the Church. And as was said already, Baptists were quick to organize beyond the local congregation.

Baptists did early on desire a pure New Testament religion which results to this day with the mentality of many that the First Baptist Church truly is the first church, the denomination closest to the church of the New Testament. But the most important aspect of it all, the place of baptism, is never bridged between the two groups, certainly never officially. The church of Christ is defined as preaching and practicing believers' immersion in Jesus' name in order to be saved. The Baptists have ever credalized baptism, once pouring then immersion, as an expression of acceptance of the Church.

The results of fellowship between Baptists and churches of Christ are predictable. Someone must give. To have struggled for centuries for acceptance on behalf of your very life and property, and then finally to have found a way to achieve it, is not easily walked away from. Henry Denne's son, also a preacher, began to promote Baptist teaching around 1680. A Mr. Hirst of the Rossendale church of Christ persuaded his brethren in northern England to merge into the Baptist fold in the early 1700's. The resultant compromises plunged remaining churches of Christ back into the shadows of obscurity.

But the results were not all one way. As Baptists began making their way into the New World, many came with a renewed desire for the pure religion of Christ. Roger Williams, noted Baptist who began that church in the British colonies, actually left the Baptist fold and went into history seeking a closer walk with

Jesus. Elias Smith was a Baptist preacher in New England who decided against Calvinism and determined to launch a restoration of the Lord's church in America. He began the first publication of a religious periodical in 1808.

It is reported that early in United States history Baptist Churches in Indiana and North Carolina took to calling themselves churches of Christ as they sought "original ground." Twelve Baptist Churches formed an association in Kentucky "constituted on the Bible."

And perhaps most striking is the fact that the doctrine of baptism in America among Baptists became more fluid, sometimes even Baptist pulpits proclaiming Acts 2:38 as the reason for it. That is, until a man named Alexander Campbell, recently come from the British Isles, made such a point of it, the Baptists generally could have no more of it.

And there is more. One group to come from the effort to maintain New Testament purity is the Quakers. Though radical in their persuasion, they were tempered by their former connections to the church of Christ in London. Attaining great influence in America through the efforts of William Penn and George Fox, they promoted a concept of Christianity free from ecclesiasticism and man-made tradition. Benjamin Franklin was heavily influenced by Fox's preaching. Though not known for his devotion to Christ, nevertheless, Franklin had this for his hope in founding a new nation, "He who shall introduce into public affairs principles of primitive Christianity will change the face of the world and be remembered for a thousand years."

An attitude was building in the United States of America, an attitude of evangelistic fervor and devotion to the Lord that would constitute a storm of its own. Religious freedom had been

introduced into the equation. For the first time since before Vortigern, people could worship God freely without fear. It was a storm that would sweep the world. Only this time, the church of Christ would be riding high on it.

Chapter Six

Restoration from the Wilderness

(AD 1800-Present)

"And He has made of one blood every nation of men to dwell on all the face of the earth, and has determined their pre-appointed times and the boundaries of their dwellings, so that they should seek the Lord, in the hope that they might grope for Him and find Him, though He is not far from each one of us..," (Acts 17:26, 27).

With the new age of modern discovery, it can be said that the Catholics were "the firstest with the mostest." As the Ninetheenth Century began to dawn, the New World was almost totally Catholic dominated. The only exception was a strip of land along the east coast of North America, and even that had a colony

distinctly Catholic within it (Maryland), plus Spanish Florida to the south, and French Canada and Louisiana to the north and west respectively. The reason for this extraordinary conquest has as much to do with bravery, intrepidity, devotion, and zeal as it has to do with anything else. It is a remarkable achievement. The only reason for a British dominated east coast was the defeat of the Spanish Armada in 1588. But it was enough.

Protestant zeal also played a major role in founding a nation free to worship as individuals and states saw fit. Rationalism was a part of it but not much. The Enlightenment thinking of the 1600's was used by believers in Christ to conquer the world. The Rationalists simply wanted to make sure they had their own arena of the freedom staked out in the mind of the citizenry. Only recently (late twentieth century) have they tried to redefine America in their terms.

The religious zeal of the American population is demonstrated by the Great Awakenings. Two grand revivals within two generations speak of a Bible dominated people, just what the inhabitants wanted.

The First Great Awakening had to do with personal piety and restored devotion to church life. The Second Great Awakening, though not ignoring the earlier imperative to a righteous life, had to do with a desire to destroy denominational differences and find the unity in Christianity that the Bible so plainly speaks of but has seemed so illusive since 1517.

A major "player" in that second revival was Barton Stone. Born in Maryland, he learned of the grace of God in North Carolina from the Presbyterians and soon established himself among them as an evangelist of that grace. Moving to Kentucky around 1801, he partook with various ministers of different

denominations (Presbyterian, Methodist, Baptist) as together they brought thousands to conviction and conversion, according to a faith-only mentality yet without the Calvinistic isolationism. After all, Stone knew God's grace was open to all. The cross of Christ proved it. Though later disavowing the excess emotionalism of the two-to-three-week meeting, Stone always saw that effort at Cane Ridge as God's moving people closer to true religion than would ever have taken place in them without it.

The Presbyterian synod to which Stone answered balked at the revival. Refusing to repudiate it, he saw the synod as hindering the work of God he was called to do. Severing himself from the Presbyterians (they were going to boot him out, anyway), he and the church he was ministering to wrote The Last Will and Testament of the Springfield Presbytery in 1803. They had set their course for a vision of the church of Christ without

denominational barriers, without credal restrictions, and without limits to spiritual growth. This caused the effort spawned at this time to go to extremes once in a while. But as it matured in solid Bible study, gradually coming together was the essence of Christianity in its primitive form that each individual and congregation were free to find and accept for themselves. Stone would be the only leader from this beginning to stand firm and consistent on such "new" ground. But he would not be alone.

At the University of Glasgow in Scotland in the late 1700's, a peculiar philosophy of religion and the church was having interesting effect. It was spear-headed by one John Glas and Robert Sandeman. It was actually a revolution in denominational thought based on a common-sense view of the Bible and the idea that Divine truth is to be known rationally. Faith in Jesus does not

come from a mystical gift from the Holy Spirit but from the simple rational consideration of the evidence for Jesus that the Holy Spirit has already given to all men, found in the pages of the holy Scripture. In that Bible is found the pattern for a faithful church of Christ that all men can "divine" for themselves: a weekly observance every Lord's Day of the Lord's Supper for baptized believers (no miraculous activity to be expected); church government is autonomous from the congregation's own membership; only elders and deacons are to be in that government; no state control of the church is to be allowed; the Roman Church is apostate; the Old Testament does not determine New Testament religion; baptism must be received for the remission of sins, however it is administered.

The striking similarities between this understanding and what we have already seen is apparent. The allowance of any mode of

baptism demonstrates that this is not pure "church of Christ" doctrine; yet, by this time, the openness with which churches of Christ would have operated and their preachers preached would indicate an influence, however indirect.

Though it has long been advocated by faithful preachers of the gospel of Christ that the Bible alone is all a man needs to find and obey the truth of God in its fullness (John Glas' assertion), still, with the gospel freely published by this time for over two hundred years, the ability of the people to see it without credal determinants is obvious by its loss. The presence of churches of Christ demonstrates it can be done; but it was not being done by most, still needing someone to guide them.

Both Thomas and Alexander Campbell would find the "guide" they needed with the help of this philosophy. Though both were strongly independent in thought, they nevertheless listened

to practically all who came their way. And what they found helpful in determining the truth they took hold of with vigor, whether Locke or Glas or Calvin or Augustine.

The Campbells were preachers in the Presbyterian Church in Ireland who were dissatisfied with the confusion and division they witnessed in organized denominational religion. The barriers to Christ the denominations seemed to raise for many were extremely distasteful. So also the hindrances to fellowship with those of "like precious faith" but who were not of their branch of Presbyterianism were rejected.

For health reasons, Thomas Campbell leaves his family and comes to settle in the Washington, Pennsylvania, area. He loves it and urges his family to follow. The first attempt results in a shipwreck that forces his son Alexander to get serious about his spiritual life. With new-found commitment to God, Alex uses the

year delay to study for the ministry at the University of Glasgow. He appears to be unaware of churches of Christ around him and will continue to be until they respond to his reformation efforts within denominationalism in the mid-1800's.

While the family delays, Thomas runs afoul of the Presbyterian synod to which he is amenable. As efforts are underway to discharge him, he with members of the church to which he ministers writes The Declaration and Address, an amazingly similar statement of unity in Christ and freedom of faith as came from Barton Stone.

When the family arrives in Washington in 1809, Thomas makes them aware of his religious turn. Alexander reads the document and declares to his father that the rest of his life will be spent spreading those principles in the hearts of people.

Alexander Campbell marries and settles in Bethany, (West)

Virginia. When children are born to him, the question comes what to do for them religiously. Whether to baptize his infants is no small matter at this point. After what he said was a thorough study of the subject, he refuses baptism for his children but then concludes that he himself is not adequately baptized. He decides he wants the baptism of Peter's sermon in Acts 2:38. He wants it to be for the same purpose, by the same authority, and in the same way as was practiced by those first disciples of the church.

A Baptist preacher, Mathias Luce, administers the immersion after much hesitation, for the Campbells made it clear this was not to join any denomination, including the Baptist Church. The entire family--father, son, wives--were immersed for the remission of sins in the presence of the congregation that Thomas and Alexander preached for. Very soon afterward, every member of that group shared in the same obedience. The Brush Run, PA, church of

Christ was fully established in 1812.

Interestingly, though Barton Stone was slow to come to belief in the essentiality of immersion for remission of sins, various preachers connected with his efforts preached it freely. They established what they called churches of Christ in the northern Alabama and southern Tennessee region around 1804. Some believe that these were churches of Christ established on their own initiative that simply heard of the Stone effort and later joined themselves to them in work and fellowship. It was not long until believer's immersion for the remission of sins was characteristic among the churches of Christ connected to Stone.

Meanwhile, the Brush Run church did join various Baptist associations because they were warmly encouraged to do so by the Baptists themselves. The younger Campbell was used more than

once to debate paedo-baptists (baptizers of infants) in the area. By connecting Brush Run with the Baptists at first, confusion resulted once more between the two groups; but this time many Baptist Churches dissolved their Baptist connections and joined with the "Disciples" of Campbell. The Baptist denomination officially withdrew fellowship from the "Campbellite" disciples in 1828.

Both Stone and the Campbells enjoyed outstanding success in their efforts. In 1831, a meeting was called around the end of the year, first in Georgetown then in Lexington, Kentucky, to formally establish one fellowship between the two groups. With Alexander Campbell's disapproval (Campbellites never did listen to their "leader" that much), two separate churches became one fellowship without the aid or hindrance of state or hierarchial control. What the meeting did was basically reassert the desire for

freedom and unity in religion that the Bible encourages, allowing only the Bible as the people freely understood it to be the final word of authority in all matters pertaining to the church.

The result was an astounding unity that carries through to this day when this basis is consistently followed. It defines the church locally, it preaches immersion in Jesus' name after repentance for the remission of sins, it upholds celebrations of the Lord's Supper the first day of every week, a righteous life according to the New Testament, and the involvement in good works whatever the church can accomplish. The churches called themselves Christian churches, Disciples of Christ, and churches of Christ.

From here the church took off in a wildfire of evangelism that swept the United States as people by the thousands wanted such a clear free message of Christianity. It came back across the ocean

to Britain and was enthusiastically received. From there, it spread through the far reaches of the British Empire, while Catholicism was in full (and final?) retreat and Protestantism has been deciding what to do with itself. It has continued in force for almost two hundred years worldwide and shows no sign of abatement, persuading and appealing to all nations, races, cultures, and producing a purifying effect against sin throughout the entire world. She came out of the wilderness with a vengeance.

Conclusion

"When Jesus came into the region of Caesarea Philippi, He asked His disciples, saying, 'Who do men say that I, the Son of man, am?'

"So they said, 'Some say John the Baptist, some Elijah, and others Jeremiah or one of the prophets.'

"He said to them, 'But who do you say that I am?'

"Simon Peter (Rocky) answered and said, 'You are the Christ, the Son of the living God!'

"Jesus answered and said to him, 'Blessed are you, Simon Bar-Jonah, for flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but My Father who is in heaven. And I say to you, that you are Peter (Rocky), and on this rock I will build My church, and the gates of Hades shall not prevail against it,'" (Matthew 16:13-18).

"And in the days of these kings (Roman emperors) the God of heaven will set up a kingdom which shall never be destroyed; and the kingdom shall not be left to other people; it shall break in pieces and consume all these kingdoms (empires), and it shall stand forever," (Daniel 2:44).

"But the woman was given two wings of a great eagle, that she might fly into the wilderness to her place, where she is nourished for a time and times and half a time, from the presence of the serpent," (Revelation 12:14).

When Alexander Campbell made his preaching tour through England in 1847-48, there met him various brethren who identified themselves as members of the ancient church. What an amazing "reunion" that must have been! Here is a man dedicating his life

to restore the church which these English communicants claimed was their own and had been on their soil for hundreds of years. Earlier, in 1818, a church of Christ in New York, NY, sought word from their brethren, wherever they might be. Some five different congregations responded, all from the British Isles.

Over one hundred years later, in the aftermath of World War II, two missionaries from the United States found their way to Germany to help bring these people to a saving knowledge of Jesus Christ. The preachers, Roy Palmer and Otis Gatewood, were direct descendants of the faith as put forth by Campbell and Stone.

In 1955, they met Hans Grimm who told them of the ancient church, of which he was a faithful member through all the atrocities of Nazi and Communist maltreatment (for instance, in 1933, the Nazis imprisoned in concentration camps all the elders and deacons of churches of Christ in Germany). He was a living

witness to the survival of the churches of Christ in Central and Eastern Europe.

These findings are increasing, their realization dawning. Though factually based, some conclusions presented here could be wrong in particulars. The existence of churches of Christ from AD 27 is a matter of faith, after all. Simple demonstration of misapplication of evidence is all that's needed to disprove the thesis.

Nor is there any Biblical truth that is challenged by the falsification of the thesis. The presence of non-denominational New Testament churches today validates the premise that churches of Christ as defined are real, thus the eternality of the work Jesus finished two thousand years ago.

Nevertheless, pertaining to the scriptures referenced, the

existence of such churches somewhere in the world through the ages is what you would expect. To find their footprints, their "relics," their scraps left behind in the march of historic warfare between Christ and Satan is exciting and edifying beyond words. It is the whisper of family, of witness to the faithfulness of God and the ability of faith in Him to survive the most ghastly attacks and the most lonely vigils. Over these past centuries of quiet darkness is heard, Be still. Be at peace. Be sure. If we were able to overcome,....

The world will have to deal with what has been found. New Testament religion has a continuous historical life. It is not a mere product of two-thousand-year-old assumptions. Christianity is not limited to the meagerness of man-made traditions and man-made weakness. The church of Christ as defined in the purity of New

Testament religion is real, sustaining itself against all comers. It is neither Catholic, Protestant, nor Jewish. It lives by God's sustaining power, forever a rebuke to the whims of men, even of men who claim their whims in the name of Jesus Christ.

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